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Music on the Edge: Da Capo Chamber Players at the Warhol Museum

CHRISTIAN KRIEGESKOTTE on February 15, 2019 at 6:00 am

On Saturday, February 2, 2019, the [Andy Warhol Museum](#) welcomed New York's storied [Da Capo Chamber Players](#) to Pittsburgh under the auspices of Music on the Edge. Curated by the University of Pittsburgh's Department of Music, [Music on the Edge](#) (MOTE) has been consistently bringing progressive contemporary music to life in Pittsburgh since 1990. Boasting its own resident ensemble and a sophisticated rotation of imported ensembles and performers, MOTE is co-curated by Pitt faculty composers [Eric Moe](#) and [Mathew Rosenblum](#) and has successfully broken through the bounds of more parochial collegiate programs by offering off-campus presentations of roughly six performances during the regular concert season. The result compels the department's students out into the wild, exposing them to the breadth of Pittsburgh's sophisticated arts and culture communities, while infusing high caliber new music into the consciousness of greater Pittsburgh.

The present stage of MOTE's evolving mission to expose new generations of composers and musicians to Pittsburgh and Pittsburgh to internationally-renowned stewards of contemporary music performance has taken shape over the past decade in its partnership with the Warhol Museum's wonderful Sound Series. This partnership has flourished, regularly bringing the Warhol's modest lecture hall to capacity to hear ensembles including Alarm Will Sound, Newband and the Harry Partch Instruments, JACK Quartet, NOW Ensemble, and the first "Beyond: Microtonal Music Festival" during MOTE's 2015-16 season.

Saturday's presentation of the Da Capo Chamber Players made no exception to these standards with a range of works composed between 2002 and 2018 by a diversity of important, locally-affiliated and national composers. Da Capo, comprised of Curtis Macomber (violin), Chris Gross (cello), Patricia Spencer (flute), Steven Beck (piano), and guest artist Carol McGonnell (clarinet) is presently embarking upon their forty-eighth season, and brought to the stage the signature elegance for which the ensemble is well known, illuminating each work with the same dedication concert goers may expect from performances of traditional and familiar repertoire. This commitment and resolve made testament to the group's longevity and tied nicely into MOTE's agenda by stealthily normalizing a compelling contemporary program without pandering or overcompensating.



David Sanford

Pittsburgh native [David Sanford](#)'s work *Dogma 74* was expressed beautifully by the full ensemble in pointed textures and serial harmonies that evoked shades of Birtwistle throughout. The curious program notes remarked that the piece, commissioned in 2002 by the Empyrean Ensemble at UC Davis, was inspired "by the anti-cosmetic ideals set forth in the Dogme 95 film director's manifesto, but ultimately fails to live up to what the composer imagines as the musical equivalents of...the group's tenets." It may be that Sanford was alluding to the fact that the founders of the Dogme 95 movement (Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg) both admittedly failed to adhere to their own rules from the very first, seemingly invalidating their own manifesto as trivial.

[Valerie Coleman](#)'s work *Portraits of Langston* was composed in 2007 and depicts the various moods and images explored by American poet Langston Hughes during his time spent in Paris and Harlem. Scored for a reduced ensemble of flute, clarinet and piano, Coleman's work plumbs the colorful depths of the African American experience, reflecting back on Hughes' time as a founder of the Harlem Renaissance and beautifully transmuting six of his iconic poems into music, supplemented by readings of these poems by members of the ensemble. Suggestions of jazz and undulating tribal rhythms remained ensconced in Coleman's distinctive voice, never emerging as tired caricature or parody.



Valerie Coleman

The most recently composed work on the program hearkened back to the group's origins. The aptly titled *Looking Back* was written in 2018 by founding member [Joan Tower](#), who started with Da Capo as pianist in 1969 and was an active member during the 1973 season when the ensemble was awarded the prestigious Naumburg Chamber Music Prize. Dedicated to Da Capo's former cellist André Emelianoff, the program notes contained few comments about the work aside from mentioning "one solo for cello as a tribute to André," and while the ensemble performed beautifully, this work ultimately came across as the least remarkable among the others.

Following a short intermission, the program continued with a three movement work by [David Rakowski](#) entitled *Thickly Settled* (2011) in reference to a common road sign found throughout rural Massachusetts. As the composer explains, the title also serves to describe the "opening thicket of notes from which the piece emerges." Despite a few derivative moments exploiting the inside of the piano, Rakowski's language is youthful and refreshing throughout the work's three movements; a shimmering example of the tenacious diversity of expression that is possible when scoring for Pierrot ensemble.

The evening concluded with a work by MOTE coproducer Eric Moe composed in 2010, called *Strenuous Pleasures*. Da Capo was joined by guest percussionist Michael Lipsey, who alternated between drum kit and mallets, which helped punctuate Moe's effervescent writing and brought the program to a close with a bang. Moe's persistently energetic language conceals a subtle confidence during molten, lyrical passages and a driven, sparkling buoyancy throughout the work's more kinetic extremes. As the composer's program notes explained, the piece is informed by a few lines from 17th century English satirist Andrew Marvell, which are, "Let us roll all our strength, and all/Our sweetness, up into one ball; And tear our pleasures with rough strife/Thorough the iron gates of life." Indeed, mention of rolling through a passage of heavy metal speaks succinctly to Moe's pop-culture awareness and rock music DNA, and helped make a final statement as to the impressive variety of styles that Da Capo remains capable of performing.